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THE BACKGROUND TO THE STRUGGLE IN SOUTH VIETNAM:
MYTH AND REALITY

Current US policy in South Vietnam rests on the premise that that unhappy country's immediate plight derives principally from the continuing fact of North Vietnamese aggression. It also rests on the belief that the United States has a freely assumed and often reiterated moral and legal obligation -- affirmed and reaffirmed by three successive Presidents -- to insure that the South Vietnamese people are not subjected against their will to Communist political domination imposed by externally directed and supported force of arms.

This policy is presently subject to criticism and attack from a variety of quarters, domestic as well as foreign. Some domestic critics may be disingenuous, but many are not. Among the government's most stringent critics are patently honorable men of unquestionable personal integrity. These critics find the current US course profoundly disquieting for several reasons, of which perhaps the most important is that they tend to view the whole Vietnamese situation from a perspective quite different from that which shapes official policy. Though such critics disagree among themselves on points of emphasis and detail, their overall attitude toward Vietnam appears to be shaped by the following general line of historical analysis:

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(1) The 1954 Geneva Accords established temporary zones of control North and South of the 17th Parallel in order to achieve the humanitarian goal of ending bloodshed. The 17th Parallel demarcation line, however, was never intended to become a permanent political boundary. The Geneva Accords also provided for the peaceful reunification of both portions of Vietnam via international-supervised elections scheduled for July 1956. The intransigence of the South Vietnamese government under Diem, abetted and encouraged by the US, prevented these elections from being held. Thus, it was the US and its South Vietnamese allies -- not North Vietnam -- which blocked the establishment of a permanent peaceful and democratic solution to Vietnam's problems.

(2) The Diem government and its post-1963 successors are reactionary dictatorships foisted by the United States on the Vietnamese people who, left to their own devices, would have overwhelmingly chosen Ho Chi Minh as their national leader in 1954 and would probably still do so today.

(3) The North Vietnamese regime has given land to its farmers, developed industry through arduous labor and sacrifice, and represents the true spirit of Vietnamese nationalism, though obtuse and misguided US policies are forcing it unwillingly into the Chinese orbit. By contrast, neither the Diem government nor its successors can show any significant results from the untold amounts of US support and aid which they have received.

(4) Current strife in South Vietnam is the result of spontaneous, indigenous protest aroused by Diem's dictatorial methods -- protest which developed as a local popular movement and was eventually organized and formalized as the National Liberation Front. The Front includes a number of Communists, but it is primarily a broad combination of South Vietnamese nationalists. Its dependence on Hanoi is the result of US policy and not the wishes of its leaders.

(5) Since 1960, the National Liberation Front has received some aid from North Vietnam and the level of this aid is probably increasing, but only in what South and North Vietnamese could justifiably consider legitimate response to provocative US escalation, which could well strike them as "aggression".

(6) Despite the massive US input of men, materiel and advice, the NLF has steadily grown in power to the point where it now controls about 4/5's of South Vietnam's territory and almost 75% of its population. the NLF probably has a better claim than the Saigon-based GVN to speak for the Vietnamese people. At a minimum, the US is perversely obstinate in refusing to recognize the NLF or deal directly with it.

(7) The present US course in South Vietnam is suicidal; for the struggle has become a US, not a Vietnamese, war. Like the French, we are engaged in fighting the Vietnamese people; and like the French we are doomed to defeat. Furthermore, even if by some miracle our military efforts should prove successful, this very success would almost certainly produce escalation, direct Chinese participation in the struggle, and possible nuclear annihilation.

II

If the above analysis were grounded in fact or substantively worthy of serious consideration, critics of present US policy would be more than justified in their grave disquiet. However, this general set of interlocking historical theses, upon which much well-intentioned criticism of US policy in Vietnam is based, is actually

a tissue of myth or, at best, partial truth. Despite the fact that the history of Indochina since the end of World War II is a topic of manifold complexity on which much essential evidence is not available and over which honest men will probably always differ, none of the theses outlined above can stand up to careful scrutiny.

A

The Geneva Accords: To understand the Geneva Accords it is essential to appreciate what they were and what they were not, to recognize the particular context in which they were drafted, and to appreciate the positions taken towards them at the time by the US and the GVN, positions which have been consistently adhered to ever since. The so-called "Geneva Accords" consisted of 4 interlocking documents of which the two most important for our purposes are (1) "Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet-Nam, July 20, 1954", signed by representatives of the Commander-in-Chief of the People's Army of Vietnam (the Viet Minh) and of the Commander-in-Chief of the French Union Forces in Indochina (not by any representative of the GVN) and (2) a "Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference, July 21, 1954", signed by representatives of Cambodia, the North Vietnamese government (the DRV), France, Laos, the People's Republic of China, the USSR and the United Kingdom. The US did not sign this final agreement but,

instead, made a unilateral statement of its position. The GVN not only did not sign the agreement but formally and explicitly objected to several of its provisions.

This Final Declaration did specify that:

"general elections shall be held in July 1956, under the supervision of an international commission composed of representatives of the Member States of the International Supervisory Commission, referred to in the agreement on the cessation of hostilities."

In its unilateral declaration, the US reaffirmed a declaration made in Washington on 29 June which held:

"in the case of nations now divided against their will, we shall continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections supervised by the United Nations to insure that they are conducted fairly."

Taken out of context, these facts could be cited to support the view that the US and the GVN had no right not to go through with the June 1956 elections and hence must assume primary blame for all that has happened since then.

But this is too simple and the real situation was far more complex. In that same 21 July 1954 Unilateral Declaration, the US also made it explicitly clear that it would "view any renewal of the aggression in violation of the aforesaid agreement with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security". The post-1954 behavior of the Hanoi regime made it obvious that the Communist masters of the DRV were unalterably opposed to political freedom in our sense of the word and to any exercise of free political choice by the Vietnamese

people. Faced with a conflict between its desire to see free elections held and its desire to prevent aggression, the US had every right to opt for the latter, particularly since by 1956 it was clear to all but the most willfully starr/-eyed that such supervision as the ICC could provide would be inadequate to prevent any elections held in North Vietnam from being a mockery/.

The GVN, furthermore, can hardly be blamed for not following an international agreement to which it was not a party and to which it had specifically objected. The wording of the documents which comprise the 1954 "Geneva Accords" leaves much to be desired in terms of precision. The whole atmosphere under which these Accords were reached was influenced by many considerations, including French domestic politics and the overriding political ambitions of Pierre Mendes-France. The demarcation line was drawn in such a fashion as to give the Northern Zone a population advantage of about 2 million people. Once in power, the Communist masters of the Viet Minh shucked their "broad nationalist front" guise and set about ruthlessly imposing a rigorous set of Communist political controls quite sufficient to overcome any pro forma ICC supervision, particularly since the ICC could not act without a formal unanimity easily hamstrung by its Communist member, Poland. As the GVN rightly recognized -- and, indeed, had seen from the outset -- the 1956 elections could have had

no result other than that of surrendering South Vietnam to Hanoi's Communist control, regardless of the real wishes of the Vietnamese people north or south of the 17th Parallel. In ignoring the election deadline the GVN was simply refusing to commit political suicide or to subject its people to irrevocable Communist domination.

B

The Reactionary Regime Thesis: The Diem government and its successors had (and have) many faults, but it is a gross distortion of the truth to maintain that they have depended solely on US bayonets for their continued existence. Nor is it true that, left to their own devices, the majority of the Vietnamese people would have willingly rallied to the nationalist banner of the benign Uncle Ho in 1954 or would do so today. The Communist-controlled Viet Minh movement was successful in temporarily usurping the cause of Vietnamese nationalism, but even by 1954 its pretensions were wearing thin in the eyes of many Vietnamese. A reliable, completely objective assessment of Vietnamese popular sentiment was not possible then, nor is it today. It should not be ignored, however, that the Geneva Accords made it temporarily possible for those in the Southern Zone who wished to put themselves under Viet Minh political control to go north, and for those in the Northern Zone who wished to escape such control to go south. Somewhere between 80,000 and 90,000 people in the south availed themselves of the opportunity to go north, though many of these

were Viet Minh cadre or combatants. By comparison, almost 900,000 people fled from the north to go to South Vietnam, many breaking the traditionall, strong Vietnamese ties to native villages and ancestral tombs in order to get away from the political domination of the Viet Minh's Communist masters. These comparative figures speak for themselves. They convey an inescapable message to anyone willing to take an objective look at what actually happened.

C

Comparison of the Two Regimes: Once installed in Hanoi, the leaders of the North Vietnamese regime -- who are also the leaders of the Lao Dong (Communist) Party -- set about imposing iron controls over the population of North Vietnam and restructuring North Vietnamese society along Communist lines. In 1955 they embarked upon a doctrinally motivated and brutally executed "land reform" movement slavishly patterned on the Chinese model. Ignoring the fact that the percentage of land holdings cultivated by their owners was higher in the Red River Delta than anywhere else in Asia (61%) the North Vietnamese Communists arbitrarily invented a class of "landlords" required by Communist dogma so that this class could be destroyed. Untold numbers of innocent peasants were murdered in various barbarous ways; many more were summarily imprisoned. Exactly how much suffering was involved will never be known, but some indication of the magnitude may be inferred from the fact that in December 1956, 12,000 victims of this campaign

were released from forced labor camps to which they had been unjustly condemned.

The "land reform" movement cost Truong Chinh his position as Secretary General of the Lao Dong Party, though he remained a member of the Politburo and is still, next to Ho himself, one of the DRV's most influential leaders. The "land reform" movement also provoked several genuinely spontaneous peasant uprisings in North Vietnam which were summarily put down with relentless ferocity. The Red River Delta (and, indeed, North Vietnam generally) has always been a rice deficit area, but the rigid, doctrinally dictated policies of Hanoi's Communist regime have added to the miseries caused by an insufficient food supply and the vagaries of nature. In the industrial sector, Hanoi (again for doctrinal reasons) has embarked upon a prestige program of building heavy industry, a program which has taken up many scarce resources, borne little relation to the real needs of the North Vietnamese economy and contributed virtually nothing to the welfare of its people.

Although none of the post-1954 governments in South Vietnam can lay any claim to perfection, progress was recorded there (particularly in the early days) that seemed almost miraculous in view of the obstacles faced. Diem inherited a land racked by over a decade of anarchy and war with no tradition of loyalty to any Saigon regime. He was also faced with the responsibility for resettling the unanticipated

influx of approximately 900,000 refugees. Despite his government's shortfalls in performance and its many errors of commission and omission, the fact remains that during the 1954-1958 period refugees were resettled, new light industries were built, harvests improved, and something like productive peace seemed to be in the offing.

The pointed contrast between life north and south of the 17th Parallel was acutely embarrassing to Hanoi, particularly since it could not be entirely concealed from significant segments of Vietnamese society in both sectors. The rate of southern progress was not the least of the reasons why Hanoi decided to launch a program of insurgency before the Saigon regime became so well established that such a campaign would have stood little chance of success. Diem was unquestionably harsh at times, autocratic, and even dictatorial in his methods. His practices and those of his subordinates left much to be desired when judged against American canons of civil liberties; though his successors, whatever their other faults, are considerably less subject to criticism on this score. Nevertheless, even the worst excesses of Diem and his subordinates were but a pale shadow of the dictatorial methods employed by the rulers of Hanoi.

D

The Origin of Insurgency and the Nature of the National Liberation

Front: The fiction that the present insurgency in South Vietnam began as a spontaneous, indigenous movement and exists today as a force which

Hanoi supports but does not control is a myth to which many foreigners subscribe (for various reasons) but very few Vietnamese. The pretensions of the National Liberation Front are taken much more seriously in nonofficial circles in the United States than they are in similar circles in South Vietnam.

The DRV began violating the Geneva Accords before the ink was dry on their signatures. One explicit requirement set forth in the first ceasefire agreement was that all forces of both sides (Viet Minh and French Union) should withdraw to their respectively allotted zones of control. A number of Viet Minh troops in the south (many of them ethnic southerners) did withdraw to North Vietnam; but many did not. In February 1955, for example, it was reliably estimated that somewhere between 60 and 90% of the villages in the Mekong Delta were still under the influence or control of Viet Minh forces.

For a time after Geneva, Hanoi did not actively pursue its southern ambitions. There was more pressing business to attend to in the north, and like many observers elsewhere, Hanoi's leaders believed the south would disintegrate and fall peacefully into the DRV's hands via the scheduled 1956 elections. When it became obvious that South Vietnam was going to survive and the elections were not going to be held, Hanoi began to play a more active hand. Cadres and local forces left behind in South Vietnam were reactivated, and more were sent to the south -- both actions constituting flagrant violations of the

Geneva Accords. The Communist movement began a systematic policy of terrorism and harassment designed to perpetuate and extend unsettled conditions in the countryside and to prevent the effective establishment of Saigon authority. This campaign of terror and subversion mounted slowly but steadily during the 1957-1959 period and was increasingly supplemented by small-scale military harassing actions launched by Communist patrols.

Statistics in this sphere are hard to obtain, but those that are available give some idea of what happened: In 1958, at least 193 civilians were assassinated and 236 were kidnaped by Communist terrorists; in 1959, at least 239 were assassinated and 334 kidnaped; in 1960, 1,400 were killed and 700 kidnaped; and in 1961, at least 3,872 were assassinated. These victims of deliberate Communist terrorism included a wide variety of both civilian government officials and of persons with no official duties. The Communists' prime targets were village and hamlet notables, local police officials, district and government representatives, school teachers, and any others whose effective action was essential if Saigon's authority was to be extended or even maintained. In weighing the impact of such terror, as in weighing all statistics related to South Vietnam, it is important to remember that South Vietnam's population is on the order of 14 million. In terms of population, South Vietnam is a little larger than Ohio or Pennsylvania and smaller than New York or California.

When we consider the emotional impact of less than 30 deaths during the recent Los Angeles riots, we can begin to understand the effect this sort of terror had in South Vietnam.

It is undeniably true that in their rising campaign of insurgency the Communists took full advantage of the Diem government's shortcomings and weaknesses and that the targets of their terrorism were often locally unpopular Saigon officials. This explanation, however, is a thin excuse for the employment of violence and murder as a deliberate political tactic.

Sometime in late 1958 or early 1959, Hanoi appears to have decided that a more systematic and extensive effort was required to topple the Saigon regime. There are reasons for thinking that during 1958 Le Duan, First Secretary of the Lao Dong Party, made an inspection trip to the south and, upon his return to Hanoi, tabled a series of recommendations adopted early in 1959 as "Resolution 15" of the Party's Central Committee. This resolution seems to have been the basic planning document which led to increased insurgent activity in South Vietnam, the establishment of better infiltration routes from the north, and the creation of both the National Liberation Front and its controlling "vanguard" element, the Peoples Revolutionary Party (i.e., the southern branch of the Lao Dong). It also appears that responsibility for overseeing southern insurgency was, and still is, vested in two interlocking "Reunification Committees": one, an organ of the DRV Council

of Ministers; the other, an organ of the Lao Dong Central Committee, and both headed by a Major General in the North Vietnamese army named Nguyen Van Binh.

When the formation of the National Liberation Front was "announced" by Hanoi in 1961, it was considered something of a joke by non-Communist South Vietnamese, even though the mounting Communist insurgency with which the Front was involved was obviously no laughing matter. Skillful and energetic propaganda and international political action -- helped considerably by the near universal ignorance outside of Vietnam of the details of Vietnamese political life -- has enabled the Communists to have considerable success in selling the image of the Front as a broadly based nationalist movement indigenous to South Vietnam. The fact of the matter is the Communists have never succeeded in persuading any Vietnamese of stature to lend his name to the Front or its activities. The Front's nominal chairman, Nguyen Huu Tho, was a moderately successful provincial lawyer in Cantho with no political stature or standing, even among his professional colleagues at the bar. Other names of NLF "leaders" have appeared from time to time in the Western press, but none of these individuals can be accurately described as prominent; most of them are virtually unknown, even to politically conscious South Vietnamese. Within South Vietnam, the NLF is quite clearly seen for exactly what it is: a "front" created in an attempt to cloak the fact of North Vietnamese control and direction of the southern insurgency.

One element of the South Vietnamese scene which causes considerable confusion is the fact that South Vietnam is not only waging war against Hanoi-directed insurgency but is also in the midst of a genuinely indigenous social revolution. This is a situation which the NLF's propagandists and apologists have often employed to their advantage in deceiving non-Vietnamese audiences; for the Communists are constantly trying to identify themselves with this social revolution and to take credit for it. South Vietnam's indigenous social revolution, however, is something quite different from the externally-directed Communist insurgency. Indeed, among those most actively involved in the effort to create a new social order and to work out a set of political arrangements best suited to South Vietnam's changing needs are to be found the most sophisticated and unrelenting opponents of Communist domination. None of South Vietnam's real nationalist leaders or genuinely influential political figures (e.g., Thich Tri Quang) has anything but contempt for the transparent pretensions of the Hanoi-controlled National Liberation Front.

E

Assistance to the Front from North Vietnam: Since North Vietnamese support of southern insurgency is now too extensive to be plausibly denied, the Communists are currently trying to peddle the line that such assistance is a fairly recent (i.e., post-1960) development --

a legitimate response to the aid which the United States has been providing to Saigon. However, as the US Government's February 1965 white paper showed (to say nothing of ICC's censures of Hanoi in 1957 and 1962), North Vietnamese materiel and personnel assistance to southern insurgency has been systematic and significant from the outset. Captured prisoners and documents, interrogation reports, defectors, and other forms of evidence have demonstrated this beyond all reasonable doubt. Hanoi directed the initiation of systematic terrorism in 1957, its expansion during 1958 and 1959, and its translation into actual warfare in 1960. From the beginning Hanoi has supported this effort with cadre, technicians, and equipment; though the need for these has obviously increased with the expanding scope and scale of Communist activity in the south and hence they have been supplied in greater numbers since 1960 than before.

Although until last year virtually all of the insurgents were ethnic southerners, this did not make the insurgency an indigenous southern movement. Until 1964 Hanoi drew primarily on the pool of ethnic southerners who had come north after 1954 to supply the Viet Cong with needed cadre and technicians. This situation has now changed to the point where line units of the North Vietnamese army are now operating with the Viet Cong in South Vietnam.

F

Viet Cong Strength and Control: Always ardent devotees of psychological warfare, the Vietnamese Communists are trying hard to cloak their insurgent movement with an aura of invincibility and inevitable success. The National Liberation Front currently claims to control about four-fifths of South Vietnam's territory and almost 75% of its population. Though "control" is a slippery concept, by any reasonable definition of the term these claims are grossly inflated. About 20 to 25% of South Vietnam's rural population resides in what may be accurately called VC controlled areas. Communist influence is slight in areas inhabited by about 35% of the rural population. The remaining 40% of South Vietnam's peasantry live in areas which may be most accurately described as contested. Communist influence and effectiveness in urban centers is hard to measure; but recent prisoner reports and other information suggest that it is so slight as to be one of the Communists' major embarrassments and most pressing immediate concerns. Despite all Viet Cong claims and, of course, despite the fact that the VC are a powerful and disruptive force in many portions of South Vietnam, the areas of the country into which the GVN cannot penetrate are few indeed. The NLF is forced to keep its political and military headquarters constantly on the move and at times finds it necessary to operate from sanctuaries beyond South Vietnam's frontiers.

Although apathy or opposition to the Communists does not necessarily equate to positive support to Saigon, it should not be ignored that the indigenous inhabitants of a number of areas where Communist authority has long been in existence seem to be becoming increasingly disenchanted with Viet Cong promises and practices. The incidence of defection from VC local and provincial forces is steadily rising, and the number of refugees from Communist areas is becoming very large indeed.

There is, in sum, no real support for the claim that the National Liberation Front is an independent entity allied with but not controlled by Hanoi or the contention that it "represents" a greater proportion of South Vietnam's people than the Saigon government.

G

The Dire Consequences of US Action: The thesis that the struggle in South Vietnam is fast becoming a US war in which we are fighting the Vietnamese people has absolutely no basis whatsoever in fact. The Saigon government, again on a population base of about 14 million people, supports a regular military establishment of 272,000, Regional (i.e., provincial) Forces of about 110,000 and Popular Forces (i.e., local militia and irregulars) of about 146,000. To realize what this means, try again to think of a single US state -- say, Pennsylvania or Ohio -- endeavoring to support a military establishment of this size. Even if the number of US forces in South Vietnam increased to the 200,000 range, our proportional contribution -- considering the relative ~~disparity~~ of the wealth and population of the two countries --

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would be far smaller than the sacrifice the South Vietnamese people are making in defense of their own freedom. Casualties tell a similar tale. Our total losses (KIA) since 1961 in South Vietnam (618 through 23 August 1965) have yet to exceed the homicide toll of any major US city during the same period of time or, indeed, to exceed the US traffic toll on any given three-day holiday weekend. The South Vietnamese, by contrast, have lost more than two-thirds as many military personnel as we lost in the Korean War*. To see what that means, think again of the impact that would have been created had the bulk of our Korean War casualties been confined from a single state such as Ohio or Pennsylvania. Officials who must grapple daily with the realities of the situation in South Vietnam may perhaps be pardoned if they consider such statements as "This is a US war," or "The South Vietnamese won't fight" as vicious canards reflecting either ignorance or suspect motives on the part of those who utter them.

Overly facile analogies to the French experience during the 1954-1955 period are also inaccurate and misleading. Until the end, and even after, the French were unwilling to entertain the idea of eventual Vietnamese independence. This made it evident that they were waging a colonial war, and their intransigence on this score was not the least cause of French defeat. The United States, in contrast, has made it

*SVN KIA so far (1 September 1965): 24,769; US KIA in Korea: 33,624

patently obvious that we desire nothing more than to disengage from South Vietnam, though we are unwilling to do so until the South Vietnamese people can somehow be guaranteed free political choices. The limited success which the Communists have had in Vietnam with the theme that the Americans are but successor imperialists to the French demonstrates clearly that the bulk of the South Vietnamese people are well aware of this distinction.

War remains as General Sherman described it, and the tactics he used to suppress southern insurgency in the United States are equally regrettable when their application is necessary in South Vietnam. It is a mistake, however, to think that the horrors of war in South Vietnam inevitably produce political gains for the Viet Cong. Instead, there is increasing evidence that villagers caught between contending forces are ever more inclined to censure the Viet Cong for bringing calamity by their very presence. There is also considerable evidence that, given the opportunity and the resources, South Vietnamese villagers will fight with dogged determination to keep the VC out of their immediate area.

Should joint US and South Vietnamese military and political endeavors prove increasingly successful, Hanoi will obviously be faced with difficult decisions. There is, of course, always the risk that North Vietnam may take the desperate gamble of an all-out attack and invite massive Chinese assistance in this venture. However, it is the considered judgment of those officers of the US Government who deal

with this problem daily and have access to all relevant information available that Hanoi is not likely to adopt this course unless North Vietnam is invaded; and that even if Hanoi should attempt such a move, the Chinese would probably be reluctant to go along. These are important questions, not to be answered lightly; but neither is one justified in lightly writing off the freedom of 14 million people because of dangerous consequences which might result from attempts to protect it. If the history of the 20th century teaches anything, it is that successful aggression only whets the aggressors' appetite, and a willingness to run the risk of wider war is often essential if local conflicts are to be contained or general peace preserved.

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In sum, much of the current unease about US policy in Vietnam and much of the sharp criticism of that policy voiced by sincere Americans of high patriotism and goodwill derives from an historical analysis of the Vietnamese problem compounded more of myth than reality. The Vietnamese situation is one of infinite complexity where assurance on all matters of detail is a mark of ignorance or disingenuousness. Nevertheless, there can be little reasonable doubt that the present insurgency was initiated by Hanoi to foster Communist political ambitions and thwart the progress South Vietnam was making -- in however fumbling and imperfect a way -- under non-Communist rule. Nor can

there be any reasonable doubt that this insurgency could never have reached its present pitch of intensity without continuing encouragement, support, and direction from Hanoi. Finally, the confused history of the past decade makes it abundantly clear that without US involvement and assistance, literally millions of people in South Vietnam would be subjected to a cruel tyranny of which, by their labors, actions and sacrifices, they have given ample proof that they want no part.